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ABSTRACT

Comics are a powerful medium in the way they combine the verbal and the pictorial. Since they are widely used by the school-age audience, and by many adults, better use could be made of them by students if they learned how the comic conveys its message. The similarity in techniques used by creators of movies, television, advertisements, and comics is so great that learning the methods of comics will enhance students' understanding of other media. Although comics can and should be used to teach language skills, it is at least as important that they be taught as a separate medium with their own grammar. While computer literacy has been made obligatory in some schools, media literacy has not, and yet most adults and students are exposed more frequently to television, movies, advertisements, and comics than to computers. The point is made that teaching comic book literacy has much to recommend it.
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THE STUDY OF, AND THROUGH, COMIC BOOKS IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Comic books and comic strips enjoy tremendous popularity. It may be for this reason that many classrooms use comics as a vehicle for educational objectives. The reports of the success of this use are mixed.

A few attempts have been made to study comics as a separate medium, with its own conventions. Little work has been done to use comics as a metaphor to make clearer the techniques of movies, television, and print advertising.

Comics as an Aid to Language Study

When used in language study, comics are most frequently found in the remedial reading classroom. Campbell (1977) and Richie (1979), had their students note new vocabulary, parts of speech, synonyms, antonyms, homonyms, word configuration and endings, and sentence structure. Both also dealt with characterization. Campbell had the students decide whether characters were good or bad, real or imaginary. They also did dramatic readings from the comics. Richie emphasized how the use of different dialects affected characterization and narrative. The students were asked whether the comic was primarily a narrative, or was designed to make the reader laugh.

A more exclusively remedial approach was used by Hallenbeck (1976). Students with dyslexia were helped by work on left to right progression with comic strips, and by attending to small but important details, such as the print on a small

sign, or the darkening of the sky. The students also had to convert dialogue to quotation marks, and describe what happened in the comic from oral and visual clues. Examination of the humour in the comic aided the development of abstract reasoning. While the visual humour of slapstick was sufficiently concrete to be understood by all, the more abstract play on words, or surprise caused by violation of what the reader might normally expect, required development by the teacher.

Despite these anecdotal reports of the successful use of comics in at least remedial situations, there exists evidence that comics are not helpful in the classroom.

The Arguments Against Comics

Koenke (1981) cites Guthrie that poor readers benefit from books more than from comics. This might be because of the different amounts of time spent on words. Arlin and Ruth (1978),discovered that students spent 64 percent of their reading time reading words when books were used, but only 41 percent of their time when comics were employed. As a possible explanation, they cite Samuels (1970) that pictures interfere with learning to read. It should be noted that what is being referred to is students' habits during free reading time.

While little has been done to examine the efficiency of comics as opposed to books in teacher guided situations, teachers of second languages describe some effective guided uses of comics.

Second Language Use of Comics

The use of both French and English comics in the French as a second language classroom is described by Marsh (1978). If the comic were in English, the students would summarize it in one or two written sentences. If it were in French, they would do their language study before reading it, then read the dialogue to each other, varying the intonation depending on the type of sentence. Brown (1977) was also especially interested in the oral possibilities of comics in the French classroom. His students read the balloon dialogues with appropriate intonation, created dialogue for blank balloons, and tried to imagine what characters were thinking.

Comics were also useful to his students to the extent that they were helped to learn nonstandard French, and French culture.

Although these uses of comics were effective, they were to an extent motivational. These are largely attempts to use comics to teach something else. The use by SRA of D.C. comic book heroes to motivate students to think about compre-

hension skills might be similar, as would their kits which encourage the student to create dialogue for the empty balloons in the comic strips provided.

The attempt to use the comic book format to aid reading comprehension is perhaps best demonstrated by King Comics who have developed comics featuring such characters as Flash Gordon and Mandrake, which have been written with a controlled vocabulary, and contain at the end of each story comprehension questions. Marvel has done similar things with the Spiderman character, initially in its Spidey Super Stories series, and more recently as part of the Electric Company Magazine. In this case not only was the vocabulary controlled, but the background illustrations were kept simple so as not to detract from the action in the foreground.

The history of the use of comics in the classroom has moved "from anathema to diversion, to objects of study in courses on art, literature, and contemporary culture," (Ellman, 1979). One of the more developed examples of a study of comics as a separate medium would be the work of Brown (1977).

Brown's Linguistic and Visual Codes

It is suggested that comics are developed using separate codes for the words and pictures. Each code had its primary and secondary aspects.

The primary portion would develop the narrative and action of the story. The secondary aspect would reflect on cultural and socio-economic aspects. The decor surrounding a character, including clothing, might describe his economic and cultural status, as might his use of standard or non-standard language.

Brown's codes for convenience separate the linguistic and visual components which frequently are complimentary. Some writers have asked whether the visual or verbal is composed first, since presumably what was first created would influence the form of the second. At least in the case of many Marvel comics, a story outline is frequently developed by someone who is neither the writer nor the illustrator. It would seem logical that the dialogue would either be developed previous to, or in conjunction with, the illustrations. In either case, the editor must ensure that words and pictures reflect each other. Marvel even offers "no-prizes" to readers who notice conflicts between the verbal and the visual.

In the case of movies, this kind of problem would be dealt with by the person in charge of continuity, so that for example a character does not wear different clothing in the same shot.

The overlap among comics, and movies, and in fact also including television and print advertisement is considerable.

Some Relationships Among Comics and Other Media

If the techniques used to convey messages through comics also apply to other media, then the study of comics could be justified as a way of clarifying the grammar of most audio-visual media. At the same time, so long as comics form part of the literature of millions of people, they should be studied as a separate form of expression.

Lemrow and Lemrow (1980), while encouraging the study of advertisements in the classroom, among other activities had their student note how the pictures showed male dominance. The students recorded for each sex the relative size and position, whether the form of touching involved sensitivity or control, and which adults acted as a child would.

These questions could be asked of any of the electronic media. This might be because movies and comics were born at about the same time (the late 1800's), and television is the child of the movies, although some translations were necessary when the transition was made to the small screen.

Some Techniques Shared by the Media

Comics often open with a wide angle establishment shot that provides the reader with a context for the action. While medium distance shots are used for action, emotions are demonstrated in a close-up frame. The same statement could be made about other electronic media. Television is

sometimes referred to as an emotional medium because it deals largely with closeups. An establishment shot, such as the camel troops marching across the horizon impresses in the movie "Lawrence of Arabia." On television, the camels are the size of ants.

Transition between scenes in a comic may be helped by a narrative caption of the "meanwhile back at the ranch," variety, or by sound or dialogue from the next frame appearing in the previous picture. Sound is similarly used by movies and television.

Most media (including painting), use framing to focus the viewer's attention on what is significant. The frame might be a door frame, a tree and wall, or the space between a character's arm and the trunk of his body.

Viewer position relative to the picture conveys particular messages. If the entire scene is tilted, excitement or tension is generated. If the viewer looks down on the subject, that character is less powerful. If he looks up to the subject, that character is dominant or powerful.

While these and other techniques are used by print advertising, comics, movies and television, some characteristics are unique to comics.

Comics often vary the size of their frames, from the apparent stigmatism of an El Greco, to the wide angle of cinerama, to the circle of The Family Circus. Although

movies have used these techniques, as with split screen, they are rarely used, possibly because they appear to be gimmicky, and detract attention from the narrative.

Some Recommendations

Comics are a powerful medium in the way they combine the verbal and pictorial. Since they are widely used by the school-age audience (and many adults), better use could be made of them by students, if they learned how the comic conveys its message. The similarity in techniques used by creators of movies, television, advertisements and comics is so great that learning the methods of comics will enhance understanding of the other media.

Although comics can, and likely should be used to teach language skills, it is at least as important that they be taught as a separate medium with its own grammar.

While computer literacy has in some jurisdictions been made an obligatory subject, to my knowledge, media literacy has not. Yet most students and adults are exposed more frequently to television, movies, advertisements and comics than they are to computers.

The teaching of comic book literacy has much to recommend it.

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